

Missions: incompatible?

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In recent decades, universities and other higher education institutions have undergone remarkable structural and functional changes aimed at broadening their remit. There is a growing international emphasis on universities' interactions beyond academia—with companies, governments and not-for-profit institutions—with the expectation that research can be a driver of economic growth and technological and societal progress. This has been called the third mission of universities, sitting alongside their traditional goals of teaching and research. There are different schools of thought on how these three missions should be fulfilled. Policymakers emphasise the need to redefine the role of higher education institutions, whereas academics who study research and higher education are focused on the issue of how universities can efficiently manage their ever-growing spectrum of activities and capabilities. This mismatch is especially stark in Spain. In 1986, the government introduced the country's first science and technology law, intended to strengthen innovation, stimulate research and promote the transfer of results to industry. It took a one-size-fits-all view of Spain's universities as institutes that would all carry out—and pursue excellence in—teaching, research and the third mission. This means that unlike in countries such as France, Germany and the United States, where the different university missions evolved over decades, in Spain all three became legal obligations simultaneously. As a consequence, although regional governments are responsible for the administrative and financial management of Spanish universities, at the national level the Spanish higher education system is seen as homogeneous. The three missions live together and form the backbone of universities' strategic plans, and the law assumes that all institutions are equally capable of contributing to social and economic engagement. It also assumes that universities' strategic missions can ride together in a tension-free synergy. Whether these assumptions are desirable or realistic is open to debate, and is hard to judge because of the difficulty of connecting universities' strategic missions to their activities and outputs. I sought to make such a link by comparing 22 performance indicators related to the three missions in 47 public universities in Spain, using data from 2007-08. These indicators include numbers of undergraduate and postgraduate students, publications, research projects, contracts, consultancy, intellectual-property rights and spinout companies. I found that research and the third mission seemed to go hand in hand, with a positive correlation between them. As these measures rise, however, those related to teaching fall. This inverse correlation does not mean that pursuing excellence in research and the third mission damages a university's teaching, but it does suggest that, in their sum, the three missions may place contradictory demands on universities. I am now researching whether these difficulties are specific to Spain. Given this finding, the one-size-fits-all policy could be considered damaging. Perhaps not surprisingly, the official national vision of homogeneity in higher education conceals a diversity of institutions with differing capabilities and strengths. The national policy limits universities' capacity to pursue a strategy of differentiation and specialisation based on their specific strengths.

Spanish policymakers should acknowledge that allowing alternative models to coexist can generate important, complementary features. Allowing universities to follow diverse strategies would give them the opportunity to deliver economic and social development by forming partnerships with regional governments and other groups in industry and the public sector. Policy should be aimed at creating the best connections between universities' capabilities and local and regional needs. Regional governments should put more emphasis on analysing how best to match the interests and needs of their regions with the capabilities of their universities. This involves looking beyond scientific publications and granted patents to gain a deeper view of how universities and researchers contribute to society. Such changes would be in line with the EU's policy of smart specialisation, aimed at boosting regional innovation. For universities in Spain and elsewhere to become drivers of innovation, regional development and economic growth, each should be given the freedom to pursue a competitive advantage by emphasising its specific role and contribution to the surrounding environment.